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A MISGUIDED PHILOSOPHER IN THE FIELD OF ECONOMICS.

Habits of criticism tend to encourage superficial and barren analyses. As the power of the race to objectify its ideas increases, subjects are grasped after that have an appearance of newness and originality without much reference to whether or not their investigation will lead to useful conclusions. The high grade of excellence to which clear writing has attained, thanks to university influences, fosters this playing with ideas, with the result that much recent work has about it an appearance of insincerity. A custom is becoming common among economic writers of asking questions without answering them. Theorists seem to take a *dilettante* satisfaction in multiplying subjects for investigation, without investigating them.

This readiness to begin work, which either cannot be completed or is never intended to be completed, is so characteristic of recent writing, that it seems worth while to select a typical case and to examine it as a sample. Dr. Gottl's "*Der Wertgedanke*"* will furnish the model. The title of this book sufficiently indicates the author's intention to open the way for higher self-consciousness, and hence for more accurate results in connection with the theory of value. In the introduction he presents himself in the character of a student reduced to despair by the confusion in the existing state of that theory, who has been compelled to cast aside the whole body of statements made upon the subject and to clear the ground for real scientific investigation.

His fundamental idea is that it is necessary in the first place to establish the validity of the assumption of unity implied in the expression "value." Curiously enough, his own argument contains a still more questionable assumption, namely, that of the necessity above mentioned. A large part of it is confined to an elaborate demonstration that theorists really do assume the *unity* of value. The possible utility of establishing this conclusion is but briefly indicated. It is to be noted that he does not propose to investigate primarily the truth or falsity of the assumption, but simply the existence of the assumption. This is to lay the ground for the investigation of its truth or falsity. The importance of the former investigation, however, obviously depends upon the importance of the latter. The truth is that the investigation of the question of unity is important simply as an exercise in self-consciousness. It cannot change in any particular our theory of value, since it cannot change the laws of thought by and through which the theory of

* *Der Wertgedanke, ein verhülltes Dogma der Nationalökonomie, Kritische Studien zur Selbstbesinnung des Forschens im Bereiche der sogenannten Wertlehre*, Von Dr. FRIEDRICH GOTTL. Pp. 76. Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1897.

value is being continually reconstructed. Its only possible effect, therefore, is to stimulate self-consciousness to action along lines already fixed by the laws of reason.

Our criticism of Dr. Gottl's work comes to this, that in the premises which he assumes, an incorrect conception of the functioning of unity in analytical thought is made, which naturally affects unfavorably all of his conclusions. Let us summon patience to notice, as briefly as possible, how he goes to work.

The machinery of formal logic is arrayed to prove what anyone would be quite willing to admit, the fact of the usual assumption of the unity of value. Why this supererogatory effort? Evidently because Dr. Gottl believes that possibly the method of thought which assumes unity may be proved wrong, and thus the science of value revolutionized. That it should occur to anyone that men can think at all without an assumption of a single subject-matter, is really a mental curiosity; and that a grave dissertation on such a question should wander into current scientific literature, seems to indicate that all that is necessary in order to admission into the portals of science is the ability to draw a distinction between "subjective" and "objective."

In order to prove the self-evident proposition that all economists assume the unity of value, four formal premises are laid down, with which we shall not trouble the reader; and these are afterward (with much show of demonstrating that what is assumed must be taken to be natural and hence not a subject of demonstration) concentrated into a single proposition: "Value is presented to Science as a Singular-Object."

The proof of the common assumption of this proposition contains in itself all the assumptions that the law allows. The author's own continual assumption is that everybody, except himself, believes that the determinant of a field of thought is necessarily single. Now a determinant is a variable, and there is no inherent probability that the field of value is determined by any one variable called "Value;" the probabilities are rather that it is determined now by one variable and now by another, or rather that it is the resultant of many. It may be that this truth is not always present in the mind of the investigator of value, but it is reasonable to believe that *plurality* of determinants is no less an *unbesehen Hingnommenes* than the singular formula which he has hit upon.

Undoubtedly such an assumption as he attributes to all is very common, and Dr. Gottl does well to draw our attention to it. There is no doubt but that a complete self-examination upon this subject is desirable, and the real question is as to the claim

that such a self-examination would change the theory of value. It is this claim that throws a doubt upon his whole work, for it seems to have been undertaken with the idea that such an investigation would make a *tabula rasa* of all previous investigation in the domain of value.

He proceeds to an inductive proof. The task is naturally not difficult. A number of citations are made to show that economists either directly or impliedly consider value to be a Singular-Object recognized as such by all. Of course it was very easy to make a most extensive list of such expressions, since without them it would be impossible to proceed by analytic reasoning either in economics or in any other science. Here is one of the extracts which he gives as proof of the slavish subservience of economists to the unconscious singular idea: "In the domain of the scientific investigation of value, a clearing-up of views has taken place in recent times, which must be looked upon as the precursor of the unveiling of the hitherto unsolved riddle of value." (Komorzynski.) To condemn economists of unconsciousness and of lack of method upon such evidence is to deny the possibility of scientific analysis.

The connection between different so-called theories of value, he continues, is verbal or formal; *essentially* they are all mutually inimical. This last fact is the chief inductive evidence of the unconscious Singular-Object idea. There is really a war of each against all for survival. Theorists wrongly assume that all expressions that contain the word "value" have the most intimate relation with each other.

It is near the close of his paper that Dr. Gottl commits himself most thoroughly upon the importance of determining whether "value" is really singular or plural. As soon as this inquiry is thoroughly appreciated, he says, it will give rise to several questions which will demand imperative answer. One is, Whether such a Singular-Object is really offered to scientific investigation? another, What is value? and still another, Is value? The first question must be answered first, and it is possible that the answer may be either positive or negative or indeterminate. In each case it will be extremely useful to obtain some answer. If value is a Singular-Object, then we know that we have been following the right path; if it is not, then we have not disproved the existence of value, we have only shown that it is not a Singular-Object; and if it is impossible to answer the first question, we are still at liberty to *postulate* its truth. The answer to this question is separate from the answers to the other questions, and may be treated as an independent subject of investigation.

After all this mediæval logic, the main question, whether there is *really* such a Singular-Object as value comes in for scanty notice. He argues that there must be some such idea in order to connect the array of discrepant theories. The discrepancy of the theories, however, is evidence of the non-objectiveness of the Singular-Value-Idea. Here again an inductive study is indicated. A number of definitions of value are collected, from which the inference is drawn that in the "world of statements" about value, the subject-matter treated varies greatly. It would perhaps have been more generous to have shown that these statements are complementary; but this inference would not suit his purposes. He thinks science demands an absolute and clean-cut solution of the unity of the Value-Idea, before the study of value itself can proceed. If the Value-Idea be untrue, then all previous investigation into value is deprived of meaning. The inferences above drawn from the "statement-world" do not, however, completely disprove the existence of the Value-Idea, for it may possibly be established independently.

The conclusion is that the Value-Idea cannot be inductively established from the "statement-world," but must be independently studied in some other way.

Because a man is a strict logician, and has the gift of clear statement, it does not follow that he is right. It becomes only the easier to distinguish truth from error in his work. The main truths in Dr. Gottl's work are, first, that in general people do assume that value is single, and, secondly, that there is a decided need in economics of a more complete self-examination.

The part played by self-consciousness in science is great. Self-consciousness is another name for stage of education; it is a measure of civilization; it seems to be closely connected with the subject of method. A study of method is a study of the mode of attaining to self-consciousness or of self-consciousness in operation. Dr. Gottl, however, has hardly chosen the correct method of developing self-consciousness.

It seems plausible enough to assume that every unproved assumption must be ferreted out and subjected to the test of reason; but is it proper, logical, or in harmony with the laws of thought-development, to single out as the subject for *separate* proof that one title which is admitted to be the very object and goal of the science? Yet this is what Dr. Gottl has done in a roundabout way. Not value, but the unity of the concept of value, is to be subjected to the test. A special investigation of this sort is indeed worth making as a study in method. It must prove advantageous, not only to economics, but to all sciences. It can hardly be regarded

as an economic investigation; it cannot occupy the place in economics that the psychology of value occupies, for instance; for there are peculiarities in psychology that are characteristically economic. This investigation into the assumption of unity in the subject-matter of economics can have no meaning, except in so far as the same inquiry is interesting with regard to all sciences. Regarded as an investigation *in economics* it can have no meaning, since if value is not one thing, but many, then we must admit that that is removed, which makes economics a science. Hence this is simply a sidewise attempt to abolish value, and economics with it. Every science, however, must have some central conception which is treated as indivisible.

In order properly to appreciate Dr. Gottl's discovery of the "Value-Idea," it is obviously necessary that we ourselves form some theory of the method of science. What difference does it make to us whether there be a Value-Idea, and again whether we are conscious of that idea? Thought is a natural process, and logical thought is the most natural of all. The trained thinker differs from the untrained thinker simply in the rigorousness with which he uses the methods of the latter. His mental operations are more conscious, and hence more thorough, but nevertheless the same. The logic of the lecture-room is precisely the logic of the street-corner. The difference is one of degree of comprehensiveness and of thoroughness. In the lecture-room, time is taken to avoid the inconsistencies that burden every sentence upon the street-corner; but the process is the same. A knowledge of this process therefore acts purely as a stimulant to greater comprehensiveness and accuracy. Dr. Gottl is therefore wrong in supposing that such knowledge can overturn ancient systems, although it may *hasten* the overturn of systems already foredoomed.

There runs, however, through the whole of his paper, an anticipation of the conclusions of investigation into scientific method, which seems to be incorrect. He sets to himself formally the task of awakening self-consciousness, and adopts as his method of attaining his end simply a proof that theorists use the Singular-Value-Idea unconsciously. The error that runs through his work is the expressed assumption that the Singular-Value-Idea must be objectively either true or untrue.* He goes so far, therefore, to prejudice an inquiry in which he is ostensibly trying only to

* "Es bedarf klipp und klar des Beweises für oder gegen die Wahrheit des Wertgedankens, oder auch des einwandfreien Nachweises, dass ein solcher Beweis ausser Möglichkeit liegt. Der letztere Nachweis schliesst sich hier ganz unmittelbar aus." p. 59; see also p. 49.

open the way, and it seems that he prejudices it in the wrong direction.

What, then, is the right direction? As thinkers in an age dominated by the doctrine of evolution, we are best enabled to criticise his idea of scientific method by inquiring whether it corresponds to that evolutionary idea to which all of us owe so much. Must the Singular-Value-Idea be either true or false in the nature of things? Strict logic deals only with an opposition of positive and negative, of past and of future; it is incompetent as such to furnish clear conceptions concerning the present, which is the point of union of past and future, which is therefore neither positive nor negative, but which is a *Becoming*. Our method of thought about the present and hence about value, therefore, is something more than logical; it cannot turn about a fixed and invariable field, nor employ a fixed and invariable criterion of that field, although it is probably true, as Dr. Gottl maintains, that most people, including Dr. Gottl himself, think that it does. The only thing that troubles him is, which is the field? Is it one in which there is an absolute and permanent unity, called "Value," or one in which there is no such unity?

If, however, our mental process is a *Becoming*, then the field of investigation is a *Becoming* also; it is subject to constant expansion due to broader and broader generalizations, and in turn to contraction due to subdivision. A field of investigation, being in constant flux and change, can only be regarded as single for the purpose of *logical* conclusions. Logic contains, therefore, always this weakness, that the premises must be taken as static, although the objects reasoned about are in a state of flux and change. The doctrine of evolution steps in to help us to a higher self-consciousness in this matter. It teaches us to make allowance for our static premises. It leads us to the inevitable conclusion that a field of thought cannot be continuously singular, no matter what the requirements of formal premises may be.

The progress of a science must be looked upon, from the evolutionary point of view, as a contest of theories for survival, and also as a contest of fields for survival. The process is not one of adapting a theory to a field any more than it is one of adapting a field to a theory. While a field must be *treated* as an objective fact, that objectivity is largely derived from the thinker himself. Thus the field of geology, as distinguished from that of mineralogy, must depend largely upon the state of mind of theorists interested in those branches. Evolutionary progress takes place through a continual disturbance and readjustment of the equilibria of mutually interdependent utilities. The utility of extent and content of a

science, therefore, is just as much dependent upon the theories of the science, as the utility of the latter is dependent upon the former.

The complaint, therefore, that the unity of value is a pure assumption is entirely unfounded, *as a complaint*. The unity *exists* as a working hypothesis; it does not *persist* in time as an objective fact. The subjective existence and the objective non-persistence are concomitants necessary to scientific processes, and hence far from suitable matters for reproach.

Moreover, in this question of process there is nothing peculiar in economics, as Dr. Gottl supposes. It is common practice in all sciences to presuppose, *argumenti gratia*, a subject-matter, and then to form theories about it. The subject-matter and the theories mutually affect each other; and thus, through selection and survival, the science progresses. Moreover, it is fair to state that there must be for every science some central theory, some supreme generalization which gives unity to the science, looked upon as a process. No one could possibly claim that this unity possesses permanent objective reality; but Dr. Gottl is the first man who has suggested the feasibility of dispensing with this unity as a process. Geology must entertain some supreme theory as to the movements of the earth's crust. The field of the science and the theory of the day depend upon each other. Geologists must necessarily enter into contests as to which is the correct theory. There thus arise as many geologies as theories of geological action.

Similarly, economists put forward innumerable theories of value, each one of which, if adopted, must sensibly affect the area of economic science. For example, the psychologic studies of the Austrian school have reached results applicable within a wider area, or rather within a partially different area, than that corresponding to the theories of the orthodox school. There arises now an interesting question as to whether the science shall accept this extension of area or shall hand over the new results for the benefit of former or other proprietors.

To be in the highest degree conscious of these processes is of extreme value to the man of science. In this we heartily agree with Dr. Gottl. But a decided objection must be entered to the manner in which he approaches the subject. His "consciousness" cannot be a consciousness of reality, because, according to him, value must be either non-existent or singular or plural. The truth is that value is *Becoming*.

It is a convenience to the mind to assume roughly a field of value and a theory of value. The theory of one moment is not the theory of another. Different theorists contend with each other.

There is, in any group of theorists, some general tendency to which a field and a theory belong. In other words, there is a moving body of science which forms the social mind common to the theorists, by which all are influenced, and which each in turn seeks to influence.

The *Kampf aller gegen alle* is just as much a proof of unity as of disunity, and neither unity nor disunity is a disproof of self-consciousness. Organic thought repels the alternative question.

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